



*A Buddhist Response to*

# THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

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Introduction  
*David R. Loy and John Stanley*

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# The Buddhadharma and the Planetary Crisis

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If we continue abusing the Earth this way, there is no doubt that our civilization will be destroyed. This turnaround takes enlightenment, awakening. The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop this course of destruction. Civilization is going to end if we continue to drown in the competition for power, fame, sex, and profit.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*<sup>1</sup>

Today we live in a time of great crisis, confronted by the gravest challenge that humanity has ever faced: the ecological consequences of our own collective karma. Scientists have established, beyond any reasonable doubt, that human activity is triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale. Global warming, in particular, is happening very much faster than previously predicted.

An increasing number of senior scientists concur with Thich Nhat Hanh that the survival of human civilization, perhaps even of the human species, is now at stake. We have reached a critical juncture in our biological and social evolution. What role might Buddhism play in our response to this predicament? Can the Buddhist traditions help us meet this challenge successfully? These urgent questions can no longer be evaded.

Our physical environment is changing at a rate that is faster than at any time in the past hundreds of millions of years, except for those rare cataclysmic events that have killed off most life on Earth.

—*Ken Caldeira, Stanford University*<sup>2</sup>

We do not like to think about this ecological crisis, any more than we like to think about our personal mortality. Both individually and collectively, humanity's main reaction has been denial. We repress what we know to be happening—but repression carries a high price. Haunted by vague dread, we become ever more obsessed with competition for profit, power, fame, and sex. Many psychologists believe that people in advanced industrial societies are psychically numbed as a result of being cut off from nature and are unable to feel the beauty of the world—or respond to its distress. The pervasive influence of advertising promises to fill this void, and we spend our time pursuing commodified substitutes that never satisfy. But you can never get enough of what you don't really want.

Escaping this attention trap requires conscious choices based on greater awareness of our true situation. As eco-philosopher and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy says, denial of what is happening is itself the greatest danger we face. Unfortunately, our collective tendency to denial has been strongly reinforced and manipulated by economic and political forces, whose well-financed advertising and public relations campaigns have succeeded in muddling the issue of climate change.

In June 2008, James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and one of the world's most respected climatologists, called for the chief executives of large fossil fuel

companies to be put on trial for crimes against humanity and nature. Twenty years ago Hansen's groundbreaking speech to the U.S. Congress warned about the grave dangers of global warming due to human use of carbon fuels. Since then the global climate crisis has become much worse: carbon gas emissions have been increasing radically. If present trends continue, carbon dioxide levels will double by mid-century. Radical steps need to be taken immediately if runaway warming is to be avoided. Not only must we reduce our greenhouse emissions, we need to find ways to remove a lot of carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere.

A dramatic example of our predicament is provided at the poles, where global warming is occurring most rapidly. For far longer than our species has lived on the Earth, the Arctic Ocean has been covered by an area of ice as large as Australia. Now, due to rising air and ocean temperatures, it has been melting rapidly. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecast that the Arctic might be free of summer sea ice by 2100. It is now apparent that it will disappear within five years. Without the albedo effect of that white ice reflecting the sun's rays, the Arctic ocean will absorb even more solar radiation. This will accelerate the warming of Greenland, whose massive glacial ice sheet alone will, if it melts fully, raise sea levels worldwide by 7 meters.

The Arctic is often cited as the canary in the coal mine for climate warming... and now the canary has died.

—Jay Zwally, *NASA glaciologist*<sup>2</sup>

Another area critically endangered by global warming is the Tibetan plateau. The mountain ranges that ring it are the source

for rivers that supply water to almost half the world's population: the Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers, among others. Mountain glaciers maintain those river systems by accumulating ice in the winter and melting slowly in the summer. Himalayan glaciers are receding faster than in any other part of the world, and may well disappear by 2035 or sooner, if the Earth keeps warming at the present rate.

Now the adverse effects on forests through over-population and the development of various chemical elements in the atmosphere have led to irregular rainfall and global warming. This global warming has brought changes in climate, including making perennial snow mountains melt, thereby adversely affecting not only human beings but also other living species. Older people say that these mountains were covered with thick snow when they were young and that the snows are getting sparser, which may be an indication of the end of the world. The harmful effect on the atmosphere brought about by emissions in industrialized countries is a very dangerous sign.

—*Dalai Lama XIV*<sup>3</sup>

Extreme weather events have quadrupled in frequency since the 1950s. The planetary hydrological cycle has been destabilized, producing bizarre flooding in some places and expanding desertification elsewhere. For the last thirty years, however, our corporations, politicians, and the media they largely control—an “unholy trinity”—have actively resisted the mounting scientific data on the causes and consequences of global warming. What has been the corporate and governmental response to the sudden

disappearance of Arctic ice? Oil companies are excited about the prospect of accessing new oilfields. Nation-states are jockeying to claim possession of new territories whose fossil fuel and mineral resources will soon be available for exploitation. This behavior reveals the gap between the economic and political systems we have and the ones we need. Ecologically, such reactions are no less crazy than the alcoholic who thinks that the solution to his hangover is another stiff drink in the morning.

Global warming is one of a number of ecological crises, yet it plays a major role in most of the others—for example, in the disappearance of many of the plant and animal species that share this Earth with us. Almost all scientists are agreed that the Earth is now experiencing a massive species extinction event, the sixth to have occurred in its geological history. Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University, one of the world's most respected biologists, is among those who predict that business-as-usual will drive up to one half of all species to extinction within this century. For a Buddhist, this may be the most sobering statistic of all. What does it mean for a bodhisattva, who vows to save all sentient beings, when most of them are being driven to extinction by our economic and technological activity?

The effectiveness of corporate misinformation about global warming suggests that the critical element of our predicament is lack of awareness—which brings us back to Buddhism. The Buddhist path is about awakening from our delusions. Today we need a collective awakening from collective delusions—including those skillfully manipulated by fossil fuel corporations at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The mainstream media—our collective nervous system, so to speak—are corporations whose primary concern is advertising revenue, rather than elucidating for

us what is happening to the Earth. We cannot simply rely upon current economic and political systems to solve the problem, because to a large extent they themselves are the problem.

This implies an increasingly urgent need for Buddhists to reflect upon our ecological predicament and bring to bear the resources of our great traditions. The environmental crisis is also a crisis for Buddhism, because Buddhism is the religion most directly concerned with the relationship between the alleviation of delusion and the alleviation of suffering—the *dukkha* (suffering) of all living beings, not just humans. This means that Buddhism has something distinctive to contribute at this crucial time when humanity needs to marshal the best of what it has learned over the course of its history.

The kind of consumer society we take for granted today is so toxic to the environment that continuing business-as-usual is a grave threat to our survival. To address our obsession with consumerism we need different perspectives that open up other possibilities. New technologies alone cannot save us without a new worldview, one that replaces our present emphasis on never-ending economic and technological growth with a focus on healing the relationship between our species and the Earth.

What, more precisely, does Buddhism have to contribute to this urgent conversation? Its traditional teachings offer no easy solution to our environmental crisis, but their familiar critique of greed, ill will, and the delusion of a separate self—the three poisons, which today function institutionally as well as personally—point us in the right direction. Moreover, Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence, interdependence, and non-self implies an insightful diagnosis of the roots of our quandary. To a large extent, our ecological situation today is a greater and more

fateful version of the perennial human predicament. Collectively as well as individually, we suffer from a sense of self that feels disconnected from other people, and from the Earth itself.

In contemporary terms, the personal sense of self is a psychological and social construct, without any self-existence or reality of its own. The basic problem with this self is its delusive sense of duality. The construction of a separate self inside alienates me from a supposedly external world outside that is different from me. What is special about the Buddhist perspective is its emphasis on the *dukkha* built into this situation. This feeling of separation is uncomfortable because a delusive, insubstantial self is inherently insecure. In response, we become obsessed with things that (we hope) will give us control over our situation, especially the competition for power, profit, sex, and fame. Ironically, these preoccupations usually reinforce our problematic sense of separation.

The Buddhist solution is not to get rid of the self, which cannot be done since there is no inherently existing self. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it,

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.

When I realize that “I” am what the whole world is doing, right here and now, then taking care of “others” becomes as natural and spontaneous as taking care of my own leg. This is the vital link between wisdom and compassion. My own well-being cannot be distinguished from the well-being of others.

Doesn't this account of our individual predicament correspond precisely to our ecological predicament today? The larger duality is between humanity and the rest of the biosphere, between our collective sense-of-self inside and the natural world believed

to be outside. Human civilization is a collective construction which induces a collective sense of separation from the natural world—a sense of alienation that causes *dukkha*. The parallel continues: our response to that alienation has been a collective obsession with securing or grounding ourselves technologically and economically. Ironically (again), no matter how much we consume or dominate nature, it can never be enough. The basic problem is not insufficient wealth or power, but the alienation we feel from the Earth. We cannot “return to nature” because we have never actually been able to leave it. We need to wake up and realize that the Earth is our mother as well as our home—and that in this case the umbilical cord binding us to her can never be severed. If the Earth becomes sick, we become sick. If the Earth dies, we die.

Such a realization implies much greater sensitivity to what is happening to the biosphere, and an acknowledgment of the limitations of human knowledge. We cannot “control” a world that is far more complex than our abilities to understand it. Robert Jensen has called for “the intellectual humility we will need if we are to survive the often toxic effects of our own cleverness.”<sup>4</sup>

Our present economic and technological relationships with the rest of the biosphere are unsustainable. We must be radical to be conservative—to conserve what we are currently destroying through exploitation. To survive and thrive through the rough transitions ahead, our lifestyles and expectations must be downsized. This involves new habits as well as new values. Here the traditional Buddhist emphasis on nonattachment and simplicity becomes very important in helping us rediscover and revalue the virtue of personal sacrifice.

We will need to recover a deep sense of community that has disappeared from many of our lives. This means abandoning a sense of ourselves as consumption machines, which the contemporary culture promotes, and deepening our notions of what it means to be humans in search of meaning.

—Robert Jensen<sup>4</sup>

To recognize the seriousness of our situation is to live with a profound sense of grief for what we have collectively done and continue to do. We must not close our eyes to a real possibility raised by recent scientific studies: the extinction of our own species. We are challenged by a new type of *dukkha* that previous generations of Buddhists never faced. Acknowledging this *dukkha* helps us to let go of the delusive competition that distracts us, to focus instead on the crucial work that needs to be done. This grief does not negate the joy of life, which becomes even more precious in light of our heightened awareness of its impermanence. Devotion to doing this great work together can also become a source of great joy. We need new kinds of bodhisattvas, who vow to save not only individual beings but also all the suffering species of a threatened biosphere.

We are challenged now as Buddhists to work together and learn from each other, in order to respond appropriately. By clarifying the essential Dharma of the Buddha, inherent in its diverse cultural forms, we can strengthen its core message for this pivotal time and global society. Although all religious institutions tend to be conservative, Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality implies an openness and receptivity to new possibilities that we certainly need now.

Most people still get their worldview from their religion, and this implies a special responsibility for religions today. If religious worldviews need to be updated in response to the climate emergency, different religions need to do a better job talking to each other and learning from each other. But how can they do that unless different groups within each religion communicate better? What an inspiring example Buddhism could provide, if the various Buddhist traditions were able to work out a joint response to this climate emergency. Given the failure of our economic and political systems, this is an opportunity for religions to rise to the challenge in a way that no other human institutions seem able to do. In this time of great need, the Earth calls out to us. If Buddhism does not help us hear its cries, or cannot help us respond to them, then perhaps Buddhism is not the religion that the world needs today.

Ah, World! It's in your lap we do our lives and deaths  
 It's on you we play out our pleasures and pains.  
 You are such a very old home of ours;  
 We treasure and hold you dear forever.  
 We wish to transform you into the pure realm of our  
 dreams,  
 Into an unprejudiced land where all creatures are equal.  
 We wish to transform you into a loving, warm, gentle  
 goddess.  
 We wish so very firmly to embrace you.  
 To that end, be the ground which sustains us all.  
 Do not show us the storms of your nature's dark side,  
 And we, too, will transform you, all your corners,  
 Into fertile fields of peace and happiness.

May the harvest of joyfulness and freedom's million  
sweet scents  
Fulfill our limitless, infinite wishes, so we pray.

—*Gyalwang Karmapa XVII*<sup>5</sup>